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Diverse Enlightenments?

CAREY, DANIEL — *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson: Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. 276.

ROBERTSON, JOHN — *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680–1760*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 2007. Pp. 476.

IMMANUEL KANT famously remarked that it was David Hume who stirred him from his dogmatic slumbers. In some sense, much of Kant's work can be read as an engagement with Hume. It was likewise in response to an equally famous question, "what is Enlightenment?," that Kant sought to sketch the outlines of modern critical philosophy. The question remains pertinent even today. It was, of course, Hume's scepticism that prodded Kant from his lethargic state, but why should Hume's scepticism, as opposed to other kinds of modern and ancient scepticism of which Kant was certainly aware, have done so?

While the women of Königsberg set their watches by Kant's punctuality, the ladies of Paris set their conversations by Hume's conviviality. Hume wished to be an ambassador from the halls of learning to the locales of polite conversation. His essays on politics, morals, and literature were aimed at achieving in print what he hoped was conveyed in person by his presence in the Parisian salons. Philosophy, for Hume, had to leave the rarefied air of scholastic disputation and, with the *Spectator*, find its way into the clubs and coffee houses of Europe. In short, Hume was on a social mission. He hoped to publicize his sceptical solution to the various philosophical, political, moral, and economic problems of his age. It was this sceptical philosophy, initially expressed in the *Treatise* and continuously polished and reformulated over the rest of Hume's life, to which Kant reacted so vigorously.

Were Kant and Hume on similar intellectual trajectories? Were they in fact speaking the same scholarly language? If so, what was the extent, nature, and scope of this discourse? Was this discussion and its accompanying intellectual baggage one of "Enlightenment"? Answers to these kinds of questions continue to generate a range of scholarly and popular answers, sometimes bringing much of interest to light, if at times too much heat. Scholarship on the Enlightenment continues to ask penetrating questions, many of which problematize the relationship between Enlightenment and modernity and are all the more interesting when considered alongside contemporary debates over "new" atheism and postmodernism. No less important for readers of this journal are the social and cultural studies perhaps most readily associated with the work of Robert Darnton, among others,

which have not only generated important new ways of understanding Enlightenment but have invigorated the field more generally.¹ Consideration of two relatively recent contributions to Enlightenment scholarship demonstrates these abiding concerns and the shape of future Enlightenment scholarship.

Both works offer intellectual context, but of alternative kinds. *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson: Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond* by Daniel Carey explores an alternative philosophical genealogy to the standard and well-worn British empiricist triumvirate of John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume; *The Case for the Enlightenment* by John Robertson tackles the comparative intellectual histories of Scotland and Naples. Carey's book is dedicated to the exploration of the problem of diversity in the Enlightenment; Robertson's to the exposition of the singular, unitary nature of the Enlightenment *tout court*. Interestingly for readers of this journal, both works seek to contextualize their accounts in what may loosely be called social terms, that is, within the framework of broader social changes; Carey points to several social factors, such as "new world" encounters, while Robertson examines the social aspects of Scottish and Neapolitan intellectual milieus. Both attempt in different ways to relate their work to contemporary questions and concerns: Carey's book concludes by comparing contemporary scholarship on the subject of diversity with his Enlightenment theorists; Robertson's engages with a set of powerful interpretations of the Enlightenment and ends with a resounding endorsement of his theorists' case for Enlightenment as that of his own. Both books deserve to be read not only by intellectual historians, but by social, cultural, and political historians as well.

Scholarly debate over the nature of the Enlightenment provides an interesting parallel to the debate over diversity in the early modern period. Carey's work expressly seeks to problematize, rather than "totalize," any account of the Enlightenment by highlighting philosophical oppositions and tensions rather than unity. The outlines of such frictions are framed within Locke's thinking on the subject of diversity and carried through to the respective responses in Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, the Scottish Enlightenment, and beyond. This agenda is constructed in a number of interesting ways. Carey brackets Locke's thinking on the subject of diversity into its relationship to three kinds of writings: those of antiquity, "natural history," and early modern travel literature. In more general terms, diversity as a "problem" is structured around debates over human nature and the perceived moral consequences of these theories. In the case of Locke, Carey observes, there is a paradox; though Locke wished to make use of cultural diversity as a tool in his argument against innatism, he meant to do so in a way that did not imply moral scepticism. Of course, many

1 Cf. Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); see also Richard B. Sher, *Enlightenment and the Book: Scottish Authors and their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Scotland, Ireland and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

of his contemporaries, like Bishop Stillingfleet, charged him with precisely that, arguing that he undermined the distinction between virtue and vice, good and evil, pointing not only to his attacks on innatism but to his anti-social, hedonistic account of human motivation. One virtue of Carey's account is that he manages to recapture both Shaftesbury's and Hutcheson's responses, sometimes eclipsed by Locke's stature, while convincingly detailing how the debate over cultural diversity and human nature played out in a post-Lockean world.

How did Locke come to take cultural diversity as a social fact? Carey shows that Locke's interest in the diversity of human custom was framed by his reading of "natural histories" such as those of Francis Bacon, Robert Boyle, and Henry Oldenburg. Locke's rejection of *a priori* reasoning meant he also rejected the assumption of the uniformity of human action prior to evaluation. This stance was shared by the new science with which Locke was familiar, in which the acceptance of human diversity was regarded as the foundation for any acceptable understanding of the world. Where the natural philosophers wrote natural histories, Locke wrote a natural history of man, taking reports of human diversity from the many travellers' accounts of which he owned a good number. Carey perceptively argues that Locke's reason for adopting this stance owes something to his argument in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. An inductive, observational method was therefore appropriate for the purposes of his epistemological arguments, and it translated nicely into his anthropological investigations. For both Locke and the new scientists, Carey observes, the only appropriate course of action was that of slowly and cautiously accumulating evidence in order to draw proper inferences. Diversity was both the outcome and methodological principle of investigation for Locke.

This methodological principle was worrying to Locke's contemporaries because it aligned itself with the arguments drawn from the sceptical tradition of antiquity, as Carey details in chapter 2. Attacking innateness incurred the charge of moral relativism, even though Locke argued that reason provided the means to securing moral and religious duty (to say nothing of revelation). What were these perceived similarities? According to Carey, Locke's criticisms of the *consensus gentium*, premised on the observation that entire nations existed that did not fit the mould, such as China, and his repetition of similar criticisms voiced in antiquity by sceptics like Sextus Empiricus proved sufficiently worrying. The fact of cultural diversity was properly accounted for by Locke's "law of opinion." As Carey points out, Locke argued that moral systems required a specific set of rules or laws, as well as a lawgiver (God, society) to enforce these rules or laws through rewards and punishments; yet opinion, fashion, and reputation provided the actual content and criteria for moral judgement and practice through the world. Locke stabilized this dizzying claim by arguing that the faculty of reason possessed by humans was able to determine moral law and its lawgiver. Though Locke retreated from the stronger claim that reason provided the source of the moral and cultural agreement as it did exist, he suggested that the language of morality was recognizable everywhere, from Brussels to Brazil. Agreement in language, however, was

not enough; for Locke, uniformity of action alone provided the convincing criteria for the *consensus gentium* claim.

Carey outlines the ways in which Locke's most famous pupil, the Earl of Shaftesbury, rejected his arguments on human nature, moral philosophy, and cultural diversity primarily by focusing on his reaffirmation of Stoicism. The key components of Shaftesbury's rejection centre around his deployment of the Stoic prolepsis argument, whereby consensus, like knowledge, is not actual but potential, manifest in the uniform cultivation of moral and aesthetic taste and expressed through shared ideas of virtue reflecting the cosmic order. Consequently diversity and deformity are merely expressions of the negative consequences of custom, education, religion, and error. Carey's important manuscript find reveals some of Shaftesbury's practical criticisms of the "law of opinion" argument, which accuses Locke of eliding social preference with moral appraisal (rakes know their actions to be bad even if they are fashionable, for example). While Shaftesbury dismisses Locke's reliance on travel literature and accuses him of moral nominalism in contrast to his own realism, Carey observes that the two thinkers nonetheless converge on the point of religious tolerance. Shaftesbury had no need for religious uniformity because he ascribed and expected it through his understanding of moral and aesthetic taste. His aversion to religious excesses, whether superstitious or enthusiastic, combined with his criticisms of revealed religion, put him at odds with Locke's case for toleration, which was grounded in Christian morality and the security of virtue (divine lawgiver).

With Hutcheson's adoption of Shaftesbury's moral sense argument and Locke's observational method, Carey strikes the balance between earlier thinkers on the problem of diversity. Hutcheson accounted for diversity by positing four causes: rival views of happiness, the effect of narrow systems of thought and belief on action, differing conceptions of what the Deity required, and, lastly, the (mis)association of ideas. Cultural diversity of moral action was thus produced without touching his more famous argument for the moral sense. Moreover, Hutcheson took a more aggressive stance by requiring his opponents to produce whole societies that did not distinguish between treachery, cruelty, and torture on the one hand, and compassion, humanity, and liberality on the other. Carey's central claim in reference to Hutcheson, then, is that he attempted to integrate Shaftesbury's Stoic philosophical conclusions with Locke's technical resources. In this, Carey notes, "he bequeathed a problem to his successors in the Scottish Enlightenment, but not necessarily a solution." Carey concludes by examining this problem, which has exercised some of the most prominent contemporary thinkers from Clifford Geertz to Charles Taylor.²

Carey offers a compelling and important account of the early modern and Enlightenment debates on the subject of moral diversity. His approach allows him considerable latitude while remaining concise. Yet such an approach also

2 Cf. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

lends itself to many more questions than can in fact be answered, and the accompanying issue of whether or not such questions would change Carey's presentation. Aside from historiographical and hermeneutical queries, there remains the larger issue of method. For a work of contextualist intellectual history, the book is rather light on social, cultural, and political contexts; it remains for the most part a conversation between texts. To take just one of these alternative contextual discourses might enhance Carey's argument to a significant degree, perhaps providing a richer understanding of how debates over diversity were related to the broader world in which they were articulated. One area where this might have been done in short order, and to good effect, would have been to consider the increased publication, availability, and readership of both the travel and sceptical literature in early modernity. This would lend itself to a broader consideration of why Locke's moment was the one in which diversity became a widely accepted "problem," as opposed to an earlier period that was also aware of difference and diversity. This kind of social tack could in fact open the space for a larger consideration of the Enlightenment and the place of the diversity problem within it.

Where Carey's text explores tensions and oppositions in the Enlightenment's consideration of diversity, John Robertson's masterful work is without question set to the task of presenting a singular, unified Enlightenment, complete with a checklist of arguments, their expression in diverse European settings (Scotland, Naples), and chronological markers (1680–1740). *The Case for the Enlightenment* begins with an historiographical essay that takes stock of the "fragmentary" interpretations of the Enlightenment, be they national, cultural, radical, plural, or postmodern.³ In their stead, a comparative method aimed at distilling the central elements of the intellectual movement is posited, constituted by the development of three intellectual phenomena: the convergence of Augustinian and Epicurean thinking, the philosophically restricted concern for human betterment in this world with no reference to the afterlife, and the emergence of political economy as the means to achieve this betterment. The reader is tempted to conclude that "the" Enlightenment is little more than modernity's trinity: materialism, progress, and capitalism. That would be a crude way of putting Robertson's thesis, but it would not be wholly unfair or inaccurate.

Robertson's powerful and immensely learned case for "the" Enlightenment is predicated on the fruits of comparative history that moves across five broad axes: the comparison of Scottish and Neapolitan history *circa* 1700, including their respective social and intellectual milieus; the comparison of social and political contexts, specifically the challenge presented by the predicament of kingdoms governed

3 Cf. Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2000); Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995); Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (4 vols.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999–).

as provinces; the comparison of the philosophies of Giambattista Vico and David Hume, and their responses to modern Epicureanism and the “new philosophy” as articulated by Pierre Bayle, Bernard Mandeville, and René Descartes respectively; and the comparison of the development of political economy in the middle of the eighteenth century in both Scotland and Naples. Comparison of two contexts yields for Robertson one Enlightenment.

The first aspect of Robertson’s case is presented through the comparative history of Scotland and Naples up to and around 1700. Working from the establishment of two different elite cultures, Robertson proceeds to outline the differences in the relationship between the political and intellectual culture of the two countries through the prosecution of atheism in each (Thomas Aikenhead, Francesco Manuzzi). These two episodes represent historical instances of the difference between the two countries; significant debate and engagement with Epicurean, Cartesian, and Augustinian ideas was evident in Naples, whereas in Scotland it was the silence surrounding Aikenhead’s fate that Robertson claims is so striking. However, as Michael Hunter has argued, the silence surrounding Aikenhead’s fate was not total.⁴ There were significant voices of protest in Scottish intellectual life, some of them public and several private, and it would be wrong to regard Aikenhead’s fate as unremarked — it remained enough of a point of interest for T. B. Macaulay to note it in his *History* of 1855. The contrast between Neapolitan and Scottish intellectual life, and its alleged “vigour,” is perhaps overstated and stands pointedly at odds with scholarly and popular accounts of the Scottish Enlightenment presented by Nicholas Phillipson, Alexander Broadie, or James Buchan.⁵ Robertson also implies that the Scottish reticence to engage Augustinian-Epicureanism constitutes a lack of intellectual vitality, making Naples more “advanced” and Edinburgh a murky backwater; but even Hume’s failure to secure a post at a Scottish university can perhaps be understood as a difference of fundamental philosophy, not intellectual peevishness.⁶

4 Michael Hunter, “‘Aikenhead the Atheist’: The Context and Consequences of Articulate Irreligion in the Late Seventeenth Century,” in Michael Hunter and David Wootton, eds., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 221–254. See also Michael Hunter, “The Problem of Atheism in Early Modern England,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series 35 (1985), pp. 135–157.

5 Nicholas Phillipson, “Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment,” in Paul Fritz and David Williams, eds., *City & Society in the 18th Century* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1973), pp. 125–147, and “The Scottish Enlightenment in National Context,” in Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, eds., *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 19–42; Alexander Broadie, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); James Buchan, *Capital of the Mind: How Edinburgh Changed the World* (London: John Murray, 2003). See also Paul Wood, ed., *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2000).

6 Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 281–325.

If we turn to the second axis of Robertson's argument, the problem of kingdoms governed as provinces, another set of political, social, and intellectual contrasts are presented to account for the development of different native political theories. Robertson claims that Scots and Neapolitans were motivated by their common political plight to considerations of man's place in the world more generally. That is, a science of human nature was in some tangible sense the product of a social and political predicament. Robertson argues that, prior to a more systematic consideration of human society and its history, theorists of both countries had devoted their intellectual energies to considerations of political and economic problems generated by more general crises at the turn of the eighteenth century. In short, intellectuals in both countries exercised their powers, honed their conceptual skills, and tested the waters by debating solutions to the challenges their respective countries faced, prompting "the elaboration of a new approach to the understanding of society and its improvement" (p. 147). Robertson takes the figures of Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun for Scotland and Paolo Mattia Doria for Naples as key figures, approaching the problem of kingdoms governed as provinces within a neo-Machiavellian framework. The most significant difference for Robertson is Doria's willingness, and Fletcher's reticence, to consider questions of economy. However, this is a scholarly gap closed by moving forward in time and in intellectual complexity through the work of Giambattista Vico and David Hume. Vico and Hume provide the third axis in Robertson's account.

For Robertson, Vico and Hume confront modern Epicureanism as articulated by Bayle and Mandeville and working these encounters into their Enlightenment projects of progress and improvement. Neither thinker was inclined to take on board vulgar Epicurean philosophy, but instead they drew on what they took to be compelling elements (self-interest, for example) alongside their concessions to the "new philosophy" and proceeded to develop a set of conceptual resources that Robertson finds recognizably enlightened in similar periods across European space. The crucial difference was one of emphasis: Vico responded negatively, Hume positively. What places Hume, and not Vico (who must be content to fit in the "pre-Enlightenment"), at the centre of the case for "the" Enlightenment was his adoption of the radical critique of Christian religion and morality, combined with the development of political economy as a framework for a philosophy of human betterment with no reference to the afterlife. Thus Hume meets all the Enlightenment criteria Robertson sets out. In contrast to other accounts of "the" Enlightenment such as those of Peter Gay or Jonathan Israel, Hume's importance for Robertson's case is paramount: Hume stood at the "threshold" of Enlightenment, "ready to open the door" (pp. 261, 323).

The advent of the practice of political economy as a systematic inquiry into social and economic behaviour, and its realization as a policy guide in politics based upon an Epicurean vision of human nature in eighteenth-century Scotland and Naples, represents for Robertson the simultaneous advent of Enlightenment. In the two countries at mid-century, there emerged a group of thinkers who saw themselves as part of a larger, European-wide intellectual

community committed to understanding and publicizing the betterment of human society on this earth alone. Simultaneously, these arguments were being aired to a wider public and made in a form (political economy) in which the case for the Enlightenment could in fact succeed.

It is a persuasive account, but there remain several critical problems. When some particular thinker fails to make the cut (a Voltaire or a Thomas Reid, say) because they lack the apparent intellectual rigour — to say nothing of intellectualism this scheme presumes — are they thereby condemned to the Enlightenment dustbin?⁷ In stating his case so strongly on such a narrow, restricted set of criteria, Robertson undermines the ability of his account to secure the broader conclusions he wishes to present. Indeed, it is quite possible to take Robertson's insightful analysis of an Andrew Fletcher or a David Hume on its own, without following him down his more ambitious interpretive path.

Carey's work seeks to highlight tension and opposition, while Robertson's provides unity. There need not, of course, be any problem with reading both accounts together. Yet both works raise the question first raised by Kant and echoed at the outset of this essay: what is Enlightenment? Both scholars have provided different ways of answering this question without attempting to silence their rivals. Indeed, Robertson's is a work dedicated to scholarly dialogue with other accounts, from J. G. A. Pocock's pluralities to Jonathan Israel's Spinozisms to Robert Darnton's literary undergrounds. Both works help us once again rethink what is at stake in Enlightenment scholarship, including not only its intellectual but also its broader national, political, social, and cultural contexts. Whatever answers future scholars offer, they will need to take into consideration these two important books.

Both Carey and Robertson also provide valuable models of approaching the historical material of the Enlightenment. Carey's work provides a template not only for how further study can open up neglected thinkers or neglected areas of thought, but also for how such configurations can shed light on important contemporary debates. The politics of diversity is a subject of increasing importance, and understanding how we came to think the way we do about identity, politics, and human nature is an important component of considered judgement about current debates. Carey asks us to rethink our understanding of diversity in light of the debates of early modern English, Scottish, and Irish thought, without reducing this to a single problem and solution. Robertson asks us, more ambitiously, to rethink the specific criteria for understanding the Enlightenment in terms of a set of arguments contextualized in different geographical areas revealing one underlying movement. In doing so, they both provide ample material for rethinking not only our relationship to the past, but also how that past informs the present.

7 For similar criticisms of this kind of approach, see Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 3–19, and *Enlightenment and the Book*, pp. 1–24.

As an ambassadorial aide, Hume performed his duties admirably (if at times he was regarded as a buffoon); as an ambassador for philosophy, he succeeded rather well (if living off his literary revenue is any indication of scholarly success). Hume remains, of course, an important figure in any account of the Enlightenment, but he does much more than confirm or question Robertson's checklist.⁸ Hume's anthropology, if it can be called that, regarded human nature as fundamentally universal but as finding different expression in different times and places, just as the Rhine and Rhone rivers flowed in different directions from the mouth of the Swiss Alps (see "A Dialogue" at the end of the second *Enquiry*). If the subject of human nature and its consideration of diversity is introduced into the Enlightenment, as Carey suggests, perhaps what Robertson describes as "fragmentary" accounts must in some sense return. Take, for example, the Scottish Enlightenment's stadial theory of civil society and philosophical history. In attempting to be the polite ambassador of philosophy mentioned earlier, Hume took up the historian's pen; philosophical history and its authors may in fact be an equally legitimate aspect of European Enlightenment. If Pocock and others are right in insisting on the importance of the Enlightenment's variegated intellectual, cultural, social, and political make-up, then an account that singles out solely materialist, progressive, and capitalist thinking simply cannot do. The case for "the" Enlightenment, if it is to be made at all, must be constructed on broader terms.

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8 Brian Young, in *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), cautions against reading Hume as progenitor of a secularizing force (p. 211).